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THE RODIN MUSEUM

AT last the Hotel Biron has been saved from the pickaxe of the demolishers and saved for the most splendid use possible. The bill recently introduced in France, which gives gratification not only to the friends of historical monuments but also to the friends and to the admirers of the greatest of modern sculptors, emulator and rival of the famous masters of all epochs, provides for its transformation into a Rodin Museum.

There could not be a better end—if it is to finish there and not to commence or recommence more magnificently—for the edifice of Gabriel which was first threatened with being turned into offices for government functionaries and bureaucrats and then with being demolished to make room for workmen's houses.

Its architectural interest is indisputable, the historic interest which it presents is on the other hand, brief. A farmer of the revenue, who had grown wealthy through a lottery and through other speculations in which he showed he was not very scrupulous, ordered its erection for a whim and more especially through ostentation. He was the son of a village hair-dresser who during his youth had both tended the pigs and shaved the beards of his customers. "Having sufficient intelligence," according to the editor of the *Journal de la Régence*, "to know the paths by which success is achieved," he followed them so well that he reached

the post of Master of Requisitions and the dignity of head of the Council of Madame the Dowager Duchess. On the death of the son of this upstart, whose listlessness and sloth did not prevent him from being raised to the Ministry of Marine, the hotel was purchased by the Duchesse du Maine, who did not keep it long but transferred it to the Peyrenc family (thereafter called de Moras) who sold it in 1775 to Marshal de Biron who bequeathed it in 1788 to his nephew, Lauzun, who was already heir to the estate and the title of the famous husband of the Grande Mademoiselle. He changed the dwelling of the old marshal into a temple of pleasure. Gaiety, allurements and voluptuousness reigned beneath the ceilings on which the plaster cupids embraced each other; Venus and Priapus were the favourite divinities of the place. When "General Biron," republican aristocrat and friend of Lafayette and of Philippe-Egalité, had terminated his adventurous career on the scaffold, the revolutionary government seized the house and, before making it a prison, installed there some buffoons. There where beautiful women in panniers displayed their mincing manners, the educated animals made grimaces and the carmagnole re-echoed under the gilded wainscoting where the riotous gaiety of "marchionesses" and girls from the Opéra had resounded. Next the ladies of the Sacred Heart lived there. Prayer effaced the memory of

defilements and debaucheries; to licentious songs succeeded the light laughter of young girl scholars mingled with the notes of birds in the trees of the park.

To tell the truth, the dwelling conceived by Gabriel has not been left without suffering damage from the years and from men. The elegance of the façade has been altered; the balconies, where the expert hands of iron workers had wrought, have disappeared, stolen and sold, as well as the grating of the entrance and the decorations of the rooms where there only remains some woodwork of perfect delicacy and taste. But such as it is, it none the less constitutes one of the most remarkable architectural gems, with its noble lines and its severe aspect, giving alike the impression of solidity and strength, and revealing in all its breadth the genius of Gabriel.

Rodin always loved old houses. Formerly, before the widening of the rue de la Pompe, he took for his studio the ground floor of a building of which only one-half remained but which, although mutilated, retained a character of magnificence. In summer the branches of the old trees in its garden, still extensive, spread over the street. At sunset in spite of the noise of omnibuses on the uneven pavement, a great warbling of little birds burst forth from it so that passers-by stopped to listen. More than one of them, doubtless, then thought of that enclosure, that oasis of peace and recollection, which Victor Hugo has so eloquently described in the fourth part of "*Les Misérables*." Under these shadows, somewhat damp, Rodin must have prolonged his daydreams, stopping to look at the statues

placed here and there amidst the borders of this melancholy and doomed garden.

Has he not remarked:

"Verdure is the most appropriate frame for sculpture. The Greek artists loved nature so much that their works bathed in it as in their own element."

At the Hotel Biron more than elsewhere, almost as much as in the delightful hills of Val Fleury, where is erected the Pavilion Louis XIII, which he chose as his most favoured residence and whence the eye beholds the admirable panorama of the course of the Seine unfolding in supple windings about the islets, the length of the woods of Meudon, from Bellevue, from Saint-Cloud, to the foot of Mount Valérien, it will be permissible for him to become absorbed in meditation. It will be the more delicious for him because, like a far-away murmur of the ocean, the noise of Paris will rumble about his retreat. Ah! how one there feels far from the modern city, from the city of industrialism and of commerce where artists and those who love them produce the effect of fossil animals. A fragrance, slightly bitter, disengages itself from the boxwood that the scissors for a long time have not trimmed and that raises its twigs somewhat at hazard according to its whim or fancy. "*Implacable Nature*," as Victor Hugo expressed it, "has already resumed possession of everything."

She has made of the garden-plots with regular paths, skilfully laid out, an immense thicket; she has given them a wild appearance of exquisite attractiveness; she has made of them something extraordinary and charm-



Rodin. By R. MacCameron
In The Metropolitan Museum of Art

ing, rotting the benches, covering the statues with moss, hooking her ivy to the balustrades, sowing everywhere the tares, the weeds and the field flowers, scattering over the whole house a fairy-like grace.

There is going to smile there a beauty more lofty and more enjoyable, that of art. "Art, pleasure of the mind, which penetrates nature and discovers there the intelligence with which it is itself animated; art, the most sublime mission of man, because it is the exercise of the thought which seeks to understand the world and to make it understood."

The greater part of the public barely knows but one part of the work of Rodin. I think that the most important exhibition of this work that has been made was many years ago at Brussels, for Rodin did not escape the rule that says that great artists make a conquest of fame abroad before attaining it in their own country. Dresden, Munich, Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam became enthusiastic over him and considered it an honour to adorn their museums with his figures and with his groups, when in France the officials pretended to ignore him. Smeared in the disused formulas of the school, admirably skilled in the craft, but only obeying certain rules followed blindly, his compeers were affrighted before his work of truth, before those forms that the light caresses, models, and to which it gives life.

Systematically they rejected him, they combatted him, they obstructed his path and there was need of all the patience with which he was endowed for him to succeed in triumphing.

"To work, he wrote, is to sow.

Afterward one gathers the harvest sooner or later. And one must work through joy of fulfilling the mission for which one is born, without thinking of what is called success."

Today, though Rodin is still under discussion among certain persons, his glory is assured. It will be more so tomorrow, in this museum, a national treasure-house, where will be gathered not only the large collection of his drawings but a number of marbles and bronzes that he jealously preserved and the series of casts of monuments that he made for foreign countries. There will also be seen there an important collection of antiques and it will be easy for everyone to note how much the work of the French sculptor approaches that of Greece and Rome.

The reason is that both the ancients and Rodin drew their inspiration from the same source: nature, outside of which there is no true beauty.

In this Rodin Museum where so much splendour will shine, I would be glad if there could be found at hand these three books: "L'Art," the "Dialogues," published recently by Mr. Dujardin-Beaumetz, and that magnificent work which has just appeared and which is entitled: "Les Cathédrales de France." One could thus apprehend the entire soul of the master, and measure in its fullness the thought of this genial cutter of stone and profit by his wisdom and his counsels. Just as one would find there a thousand reasons for belief, one would learn the love of harmony and of sincerity, one would discover new motives to cherish life, new interior lights for self-conduct.

PAUL D'ABBE, *Le Mond Illustré*